

AT the start of the season it would have taken a supreme optimist to forecast that Wycombe Wanderers would have reached the second round of the F.A. Cup and be situated second in the Rothmans Isthmian League.

But at the half way stage, that's just what Wanderers have achieved to continue the unprecedented run of success the club has enjoyed for nearly a decade.

It was a different start to the season at Wycombe this year. There was no Brian Lee, no Ray Eaton, no John Delaney and no Terry Reardon.

Ted Powell took over the manager's role while new faces filled the gaps left by the established players. It seemed the Blues would need time to settle and I suspect many followers were prepared for only moderate success in 1976-77.

Yet already Ted Powell and his team have given the fans more than their money's worth. This season was the fourth in succession the club has reached the second round of the F.A. Cup and a total in the region of 15,000 people enjoyed their three games against Merthyr, Waterlooville and Reading. With a little more luck, that number might have doubled in the third round but it was not to be as the Blues went out 2-1.

So with the F.A. Cup behind them, Wycombe are left with two incentives for the rest of the season — the league title and a good run in the F.A. Trophy.

Wanderers have failed twice in the Trophy, going out at their first hurdle to Ilford and Slough. Could it be third time lucky? They have the talent to do well but this competition is more difficult than the Amateur Cup and the Wigans, Matlocks, Scarboroughs and Northwich Vics will take some beating. I can't see a Southern side winning at Wembley this year.

The Rothmans Isthmian League title race is at a most interesting stage and any one of half a dozen clubs are in with a chance. One of them is Wycombe who have set the pace at the top for much of the season.

DIFFERENT

I must admit at the start of the campaign I wasn't too hopeful of their chances but under the guidance of Ted Powell and John Reardon the Blues have

produced some great performances. The style is slightly different, the build-ups a little slower, while John Maskell is allowed to throw the ball a lot more than in Brian Lee's reign. But the accent on attacking football is still there.

The new players have all fitted in well and none more so than Ian Pearson, who joined from Plymouth in the close season. I remember talking to Plymouth's assistant manager, Keith Blunt, the ex-Wanderer, when Pearson signed on and he told me he would be very surprised if Ian did not score 20 goals in his first season. This term is only at the half way stage and the striker has already 19 goals to his credit.

Wanderers have needed Pearson's flair up front for neither Dylan Evans nor Tony Horseman have been at their best. 'Bodger' has been struggling with injuries while Dylan struggles with consistency. The few glimpses of Tony Price have been promising and I would like to see him have a couple of full games. Powell's ace move was to snap up Howard Kettleborough from Dunstable early in the season. 'Kets' has proved an ideal target man as well as a useful goal snatcher.

There have been a few experiments in midfield and it is a shame Wycombe cannot acquire the services of Gavin Frader, a pupil at Borough Road College who have first call on his services. Mick Holifield has again provided the thrills with his pace and power while Howard Kennedy, John Priestley and Peter Cruse all work hard.

SOLID DEFENCE

Little of Wycombe's success, however, would have been achieved without the marvellous form of the back four — Paul Birdseye, Keith Mead, Alan Phillips and Bob Davies. After initial experiments with Mick Sorenson at right back, manager Powell established his defence which has looked extremely solid. Phillips took his usual time to get into his stride but is now at his best while Mead seems to go on forever, scarcely putting a foot wrong.

Paul Birdseye has not quite captured his brilliant form of last

season while Davies improves steadily. Behind them John Maskell showed his worth against Merthyr with a string of superb saves while Peter Spittle has performed well whenever called upon.

All in all the players have moulded into an efficient team and it remains to be seen if they can find the consistency to maintain their challenge at the top. If they can produce a string of good results — something that lifts a team and breeds real confidence — there seems no reason why Wycombe can't finish at the top again.

ENFIELD AGAIN

The main challenge is likely to come from Enfield who have been steadily working their way up the table. Their 1-0 win over Woking on Saturday moves them into third place and they have five games in hand over the Blues. The champions lack vital consistency at times — and that may cost them the title again this year.

Dagenham, who have won at Loakes Park this season, can never be ruled out and with defender Norman Welch now fit again, they must have as good a chance as any.

Tooting's goal record highlights their troubles — For 51, Against 45. Still, that's more goals scored than anyone else and they can't be ruled out of the race. Hitchin look good on paper with so many matches in hand but they are still in the F.A. Cup and they have a good deal of leeway to make up.

Down at Fetcham Grove, Leatherhead have a fine side together but they have trouble in finding consistency and their run of seven defeats on the trot could cost them. If you are looking for outsiders, you can't rule out Slough Town. Much will depend on the future of Dave Russell, the winger who was playing for Flackwell Heath last season. Arsenal, and Reading are after him and he will prove difficult to replace should he turn professional.

So there it is. The title is wide open for the cream of Division One and if I had a few bob to spare I'd be backing Enfield, and Dagenham. We shall see!